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NEWS

“Mein Kamerad – die Diva”: Cross-Dressing Exhibition in Berlin

N.N.

Operetta Research Center

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The topic of cross-dressing in operetta – as well as anywhere else in life and theater – is a hot one. It might, in principal, be as old as operetta itself, but only very recently has it been rediscovered by the Gender Study people and the crusaders of Gay & Lesbian Studies as a topic way ahead of its time. Next month an exhibition called *Mein Kamerad – die Diva* (“My Comrade, the Diva”) at the Schwules Museum Berlin will examine theater performances in World War 1 military camps with all male casts. Among the shows is an all-male *Gondoliers* – yes, the Gilbert & Sullivan classic – in Ruhleben, at christmas 1917.



The "Gondoliers", Ruhleben, christmas 1917 (Photo: Historical & Special Collections, Harvard Law School Library/Schwules Museum Berlin)

You might remember that not so long ago the Theatermuseum Munich issued a book entitled *Ein Bild von einem Mann – gespielt von einer Frau* ("a picture-perfect man – played by a woman") which focused on women playing male roles. This catalogue edited by Susanne de Ponte did not single out operetta as a special point of interest but included the genre in the more general discussion. The new exhibition at the Schwules Museum takes the opposite look at cross-dressing, dealing with men in woman roles, and narrowing the topic down to WW1 performances.



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FATINITZA

Poster for Franz von Suppé's "Fatinitza," with the cross-dressed star on the right in harem outfit.

War time has always been a particularly rich period for cross-dressing. Just think of Franz von Suppé's operetta *Fatinitza* (1876) where the lead character Wladimir Dimitrowitsch Samoiloff, Lieutenant of a Circassian Cavalry Regiment, dresses up as the beautiful Fatinitza for a theatrical performance in the barracks. The attending general, not knowing it's a cross-dressed performer, falls madly in love with Fatinitza and pursues her throughout Russia. (The joke being that Wladimir is played by a mezzo-soprano to begin with, so it is a triple cross-dressing entertainment.)

After WW2 there were all-male prisoner performances of shows such as *Im weißen Rössl* which are documented with photos.



The “White Horse Inn” in a Russian prisoners of war camp, 1946.



Cover of the book “Mein Kamerad – die Diva”, published by edition text + kritik.

And you will all remember movies such as *Privates on Parade* showing how the British treated their soldiers with cross-dressing spectacles. (You might also remember the “Honey Bun” sequence in Rodgers & Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*.)

The Berlin project opens on September 5, it will be accompanied by a book published by edition text + kritik, who already published the Munich catalogue.

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